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ABSTRACT

This paper considers a number of vested interest political forces that influence the course of educational reform. The discussion focuses first on the world of teacher education and some reform efforts emerging in that arena. Specific criticism is directed at suggestions made in the Holmes Group Report, pointing out the political hidden agenda embedded in the idea that teacher education should involve graduate level training following a four-year liberal arts program. Criticism is also leveled at the report "A Nation at Risk," citing errors in facts and findings from the report. The political implications of the Comprehensive Education Reform Act in Tennessee, which gave rise to the concept of Career Ladders, are also considered. A discussion is presented on reform happenings and their effect on teachers and schools. (JD)

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THE POLITICS OF EDUCATIONAL REFORM:

WHAT VESTED INTERESTS ARE AT STAKE?

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THE POLITICS OF EDUCATIONAL REFORM: WHAT VESTED INTERESTS ARE AT STAKE?

Doran Christensen
November 6,1987

The history of education and teacher education in the United States is like a collage of intertwining cyclical appearings and reappearings of vested interest political forces influencing our world of teaching. Whether considering school curriculum issues and the alternating pull and tug of student needs versus societal needs (Bush, 1987) or teacher certification/licensure requirements pushed by cycles of surplus or shortage in the available teaching force (Feistritzer, 1983); and school attendance worries triggered by cycles of alternating labor market needs (Spring, 1972); as well as the societal value orientations driven by cycles of scientistic paradigms alternating with humanistic philosophies (Bloom, 1987); the world of schools, teaching, and teacher education seem helpless to do other than wave spinelessly in the winds of these and other forces.

This short paper will consider a small number of such forces, the vested interests propelling them and the possible effect of such forces on various dimensions of the teaching profession. The discussion will focus first on the world of teacher education and some reform efforts emerging

in that arena; this will be followed by some thoughts on reform happenings affecting teachers and schools.

A MOMENT OF REVELATION

First a story!! The time is February, 1984; the place is San Antonio; the event is the national conference of the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education; and the session is the gala evening event devoted to the Charles Hunt lecture. Honors and awards of a variety of kinds are being presented. Most prestigious among them is the Edward C. Pomeroy Award for Distinguished Service. The recipient is George Denemark, one of the organization's most eminent and dearly loved stalwarts. George, once Dean of Education at the University of Kentucky and before that at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee; George, the man of large dreams, deep compassion, and sunny good humor; George, a giant in our profession who was central to the growth and health of the AACTE as well as the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education, the National Commission on Teacher Education and Professional Standards, the Bicentennial Commission on the Teaching Profession, and dozens more; George, a man of sincere commitment to the nurturing of our young; George, a man of bravery who was nearly alone in Wisconsin in criticizing Lindley Stiles for his attempt to neuter NCATE in the "famous" NCATE/University of Wisconsin brouhaha of 1963; George, a man whom many of us call mentor.

At the moment in the evening when George was recognized, he responded in elegantly delivered and warmly received prose and expressed his pleasure and honor in being so recognized and expressed his love and affection for the many friends and compatriots who were sharing this important event with him. He reflected on his years in the profession and spoke vehemently about the central role of people working together as the best way to solve problems and assure progress. A particularly poignant remark toward the end of his brief presentation revealed how difficult it had been for him to do what he thought necessary to do to mount strong teacher education programs in his kind of institutions. He said, "I very deeply regret how we have all been forced to sit in the back of the academic bus." George's world of deaning in large prestigious universities had not been any "bed of roses".

THE HOLMES GROUP

This short aside about a great teacher educator is to help focus on the difficulty experienced by teacher educators in large research oriented universities. Low of status, demeaned as lacking rigor, starved of life space, robbed of funds, and generally ridiculed, it is a wonder that the George Denemarks of the world did not all become bitter and defeated. Of course many did. Others, however, especially a large number of those associated with the Holmes group, seem to have hunkered down and tried to come up with a plan to save and enhance their programs at home.

Can we blame them? Hardly. Can we analyze and question their recommendations? Of course.

A major recommendation of the Holmes group (one that many even be a requirement) is that teacher education follow the pattern of some other professions and become graduate level preparation. Such graduate level preparation would be preceded by an undergraduate degree program in the liberal arts including a clearly defined academic degree (Holmes, 1986). Such a proposal would be of little concern or debate except there is absolutely no evidence that such an arrangement will result in improved teacher education (Hawley, et al, 1987). There is not a shred of evidence that increased years of preparation or increased liberal arts preparation makes for better teaching. In fact, the amount of teacher preparation evidenced by teachers has steadily increased until over 50% of today's teachers hold advanced degrees (Futrell, 1987). So far there have been no studies indicating teachers are better than ever. If it were so that increased academic study made for more effective teaching, the quality of teaching at the university level would be the best there is. Would that it were so.

Given such a lack of a research base, then, why would avowedly research oriented institutions propose such a dramatically different strategy? Could it be that the agenda of the Holmes group is essentially political (Tom, 1987)? A brief consideration of the vested interests of the players in this proposal might be instructive. If it is

indeed improbable for teacher education programs to secure sufficient life space at the undergraduate level (Howsam, et al, 1976) at major universities, perhaps the only "ground" available for program expansion is at the graduate level. It is apparent that the graduate programs are more flexible and more available to specialized units than is the undergraduate space. It is not uncommon for colleges to exercise virtual autonomy over graduate level programs with but little oversight by the university generally. Gaining more space in the undergraduate curriculum triggers many other contradictory centers of vested interests.

Expanding the time requirements makes no sense, however, if the teachers who must pay for elongated programs refuse to accept the additional costs. Students have a most effective way of voting with their feet. Therefore, only if overall state requirements for teacher licenses go to additional years will institutions be able to protect them from the vulnerability of further enrollment losses. Hence the national and state-wide efforts to move all teacher education to the graduate level. It is not a matter of improving teacher education, per se, but rather a thinly disguised effort to "save the store". And who pays the additional costs? - why, teachers of course.

From the point of view of the Holmes member institutions, such a strategy would have the additional advantage of placating and/or enticing arts and sciences faculty, recently under attack and bruised by the increasing

professionalizing of postsecondary education. Getting teacher education out of the undergraduate curriculum would leave more room for arts and sciences especially if majors in those fields are prerequisite for the graduate teacher education programs. A symbiosis of vested interests from liberal arts and education faculty would have a strong impact on provosts and presidents. Enhancing enrollments always appeals to university administrations. After all, higher education in our country is a marketed commodity.

Further, the major combatants to such an idea are the other members of the teaching profession - teachers, small colleges, medium sized colleges, and others. This is a foe that might easily be engaged and vanquished if the proper political inititatives were taken - not the first time that a "fast one" had been pulled on the teachers. One cannot help wondering how a small group of institutions, many of which have been noticeably absent for years from the mainstream of teacher education (especially during the periods of job shortage and teacher surplus) could have the audacity to propose such baseless recommendations and then to do so in the name of improving schools.

It is disappointing that the very institutions well positioned to develop a research base for innovation and change apparently have been incapable of doing so. One might think, in the face of this, that serious mischief is being done by those teacher education reformers. When

reform is driven by vested interests rather than solid evidence, one might well suspect mischief.

MORE MISCHIEF

Mischief is not unique to the community of teacher education "tis true. The job that has and is being done on teachers and schools is nothing short of breathtaking. Both national and state level reform efforts have been generated on assumptions that blame those least able to fight back and on evidence that is totally lacking or highly questionable.

Classic among the examples of such reform initiatives was that initiated by the Commission on Excellence in Education appointed by the current administration. Their report A Nation at Risk, was not, as admitted by the commissions director (Goldberg, 1984), intended to illuminate problems of the schools, but rather to "rouse" the public through stark and emotional rhetoric so that the country would be driven to devote attention to schools and schooling. Assertions and analyses were not grounded in evidence and truth but rather were the result of individual and collective opinions of the members of the commission - not unlike the Holmes group report. The major purpose of the report was to attract media attention. Issues had to be drawn boldly, simply, and briefly otherwise the press would give the whole thing short shrift. Unfortur tely, the media hype was so effective that overwhelming numbers of lay and education professionals alike assumed the findings were factual. The results are now well known. The report took

the country by storm and has had an incredible effect on the way we look at schools and teachers. Even yet, scholarly works cite the A Nation at Risk, as a foundation for findings and further scholarship.

One of the "findings" from the A Nation at Risk, is that teacher candidates are coming from the student population of the lowest academic credentials; that teachers had average ACT/SAT scores in the lowest quintile of the college going population and that corresponding high school grade point averages were low as well. This so-called "fact" was based on a survey of high school seniors. The scores of those declaring teaching as a career goal were compared to the scores of other college bound students. Note that none of the investigations centered on students currently enrolled in teacher education programs or those who had completed such programs. Can you imagine an argument more specious? Subsequest investigations of those enrolled in or graduated from teacher education programs (Nelli, 1984; Lee, 1984; Ishler, 1986; AACTE, 1987; and others) give the lie to these assertions and find teacher candidates' scores equal to or above the scores of other college majors. The original assertion is a terrible lie that has done incalculable damage to teacher status and morale.

It was also asserted that education courses are lacking in rigor and relevance. Subsequent findings have soundly refuted such as well (Christensen, 1982; AACTE, 1987).

Unfortunately many policy decisions get made on the basis of the headline grabbing lies; politicians and other policy makers have a difficult time waiting on the slow and painstaking research needed to get closer to truth.

MISCHIEF IN TENNESSEE

Tennessee has received a vast amount of press nationally for its school reform efforts. The Comprehensive Education Reform Act(CERA) of 1984, passed during the administration of Lamar Alexander was passed to address the truly serious/cataclysmic educational problems in Tennessee. Tennessee was and is among the lowest of states in nearly every education measure devised - literacy, support for schools, drop out rates, postsecondary school enrollments, etc. The CERA was designed to focus attention on the schools and to develop support needed to improve school conditions.

As it turned out, the centerpiece of the CERA, and its most controversial provision was for a teacher evaluation and accountability system called the Career Ladder. Initially, the purpose of the Career Ladder was to "promote professional development", a worthy and doable initiative; subsequently, however, this goal was expanded to include the goal of "recognizing and rewarding excellent teachers". The final Career Ladder design included an extensive set of criteria specifying excellent practice, a broad set of policies, and an evaluation system that was completely fraught with questionable and even outrageous practices.

During the development of the Career Ladder details, a substantial accumulation of evidence indicated that such a strategy could be damaging to the schools and would probably do more damage than good (Rosenholtz, 1987). In the face of such evidence, the Alexander administration yet went forward vigorously to implement the model. Political expediency was more persuasive than solid evidence apparently. The public was convinced of the simplistic accountability aspects of the proposal. It should be noted that the only group to voice opposition (and vigorous opposition it was) was the Tennessee Education Association. Even most teacher educators were willing to stand by benignly and allow the Career Ladder to go forward.

This paper is too short to discuss in detail the flawed nature of the evaluation system, the insensitivity of the vast bureaucracy assembled to implement the "ladder", or the vulnerability of the system to chicanery, cheating, and stealing. Suffice it to say the result on teacher morale was so devastating that many are not sure the schools will ever recover. The only real plus the schools in Tennessee had going for them was the vigor and commitment of teachers; the Career Ladder caused this to be seriously eroded.

Tennessee has very serious problems in solving school deficits. A state sales tax has to provide nearly all the monies to support institutions; most school systems yet have an elected superintendent - the politics of teacher employment is outrageous; schools have a very narrow

curriculum - art and music have to be provided privately by the parents; and much of the illiteracy is deeply rooted in a tradition of illiteracy and suspicion of learning. One can only hope the damage to teacher morale is not permanent.

The Alexander ploy, in retrospect, is fairly apparent. The tax system in Tennessee is, at first glance, extremely favorable to the rich and powerful. Somehow, the rich have convinced the citizenry generally that alternate taxes (income and property) would work even further to their disadvantage. Since it appeared impossible politically for Alexander to raise the money necessary for schools, his only option was to shift the blame for poor education to someone else. The teachers were handy so they got the blame.

Just for the record, the political winds have changed in Tennessee somewhat and, due to major efforts by the Tennessee Education Association, changes in the Career Ladder have been made so that it is now voluntary, it has been separated from licensure, and alternatives to the evaluation route to the career levels are being studied. But this has come following years of bitter objection to the Career Ladder and other aspects of the CERA (TEA News, 1985) and following vigorous political action to propose appropriate corrections to it (TEA News, 1987).

THE VESTED INTERESTS

Apparently money is at the root of both the works of the Commission on Excellence in Education and in the Comprehensive Education Reform Act. Reagan vowed to reduce

the federal financial involvement in education and he has, and Alexander vowed he would not raise taxes and would not insitute new taxes. Even tho there were additional sales taxes raised for schools in Tennessee the monies were spent for other budget items. The cynicism of some policy makers is simply overwhelming. Clearly the vested interests of both politicians were served well by shifting blame from their unwillingness or inability to provide adequate funds for schools to those least able to fight back-the teachers.

Perhaps 'tis true after all - - when they say it's the principle of the thing and not the money - you can count on one thing - - it's the money.

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